Makar Sankrānti

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Q.1. Thursday, January 14, Mauritians of Hindu faith celebrate Makar Sankrānti. What is the definition of Makar Sankrānti?

Makar Sankrānti (Uttarāyana)

Celebrated in the lunar month of *Pausha* - January 14, it is a festival based on astronomy. The term *Uttarāyana* is derived from two different Sanskrit words "*uttara*" (north) and "**ayana**" (movement) thus indicating a northward relational movement of the Sun on the celestial sphere. This apparent movement is due to the tilt of our planet Earth, at approximately 23 degrees on its axis.

Uttarāyana, i.e. the period between *Makara Sankrānti* and *Karka Sankrānti* and begins to occur one day after the December solstice (December 21-22) and continues for a period of six months until the following solstice (June 21). Due to the leaning of our planet Earth, the sun is perceived as moving away from the southern hemisphere towards the northern hemisphere. In fact, it is the northern hemisphere of the globe that is starting to be exposed to more sunlight (longer days and shorter nights). At the same time, the southern hemisphere begins to receive less sunlight (shorter days and longer nights). We thus perceive the sun in motion.

Q.2. Why Makar Sankrānti?

Makar is a sign of the zodiac and Sankrānti means movement, evolution. India is famous for its eminent astronomers who have explored the Milky Way and other constellations. They were among the first to claim that the earth revolves around the sun from one zodiac sign (Rashi) to another. When the revolution begins in Capricorn, the festival of Makar Sankrānti is celebrated. The earth rotates for thirty days in this Rashi.

Makar Sankrānti marks the beginning (i) of Saur Varsha (solar year) and (ii) of Uttarayana, the beginning of a period of increasing daylight in the northern hemisphere.

Q.3. Why do we celebrate Makar Sankrānti?

Makar Sankrānti is celebrated on January 14 because the effect of the change on December 21 is felt 23-24 days later due to the earth tilting about 23 degrees on its axis.

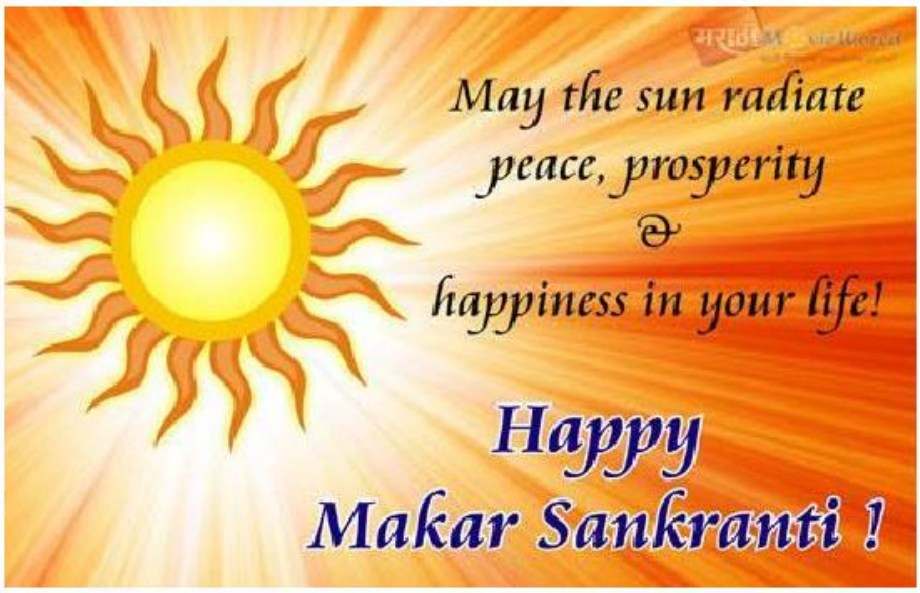
Hindus in Mauritius continued this tradition from our ancestors who came from India.

Note: *Mauritius is located in the southern hemisphere where the days get shorter and the nights get longer.*

Q.4. What do people of the Hindu faith do today?

- People wake up early, take a bath after having a sesame oil massage. At dawn, the family gathers for prayers (havan), pay gratitude to God and seeks blessings for happiness, peace and prosperity.
- There is the tradition of praising the sun because the sun symbolizes among other things life, light, and cheerfulness.
- Kichri is on the menu. It is prepared with rice, several grains (lentils-*daal*), vegetables, in short, a balanced meal. It's a reminder to eat healthily in order to stay healthy.
- Kichri is shared with neighbors and friends along with sweets with sesame as an ingredient because sesame warms our body.
- It's auspicious for people of the northern hemisphere, and we are in the southern hemisphere - so sesame need be consume in moderation because it's summer here. Ditto for the sesame oil massage.
- Some have perpetuated the tradition of kite flying, as in north India, from where most of our ancestors came from.

Q.5. Is Makar Sankrānti the Hindu New Year?

No. The lunar calendar is the basis for calculations of Hindu festivals, except Sankrānti.
The New Year of the Hindu calendar begins on the first day of the new moon in the lunar month of *Chaitra* (*Chaitra Shukla Pratipada*), April 13, 2021. Hindus from northern India call it *Nav Samvatsar* (New Year); from Maharashtra - *Gudi Padwa*; of Telangana, formerly part of Andhra Pradesh - *Yugadi* (adi- new and Yug - era or year).

Note: Certain aspects of these answers are formulated on "*desha-kaala-paristithi*", according to the place, the time and the circumstances), because Mauritius is in the southern hemisphere, currently it's summer; the different name for Sankrānti, traditions and practices flow from where our ancestors came from.